

## THE LANGUAGE OF A MISSION

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THE liturgical congress, held at Uden near Nijmegen in Holland last September, was in a sense a successor to those which were held in recent years at Lugano and Assisi, and one may hope that it will be of no less importance in the history of the Church. By turning attention to the problems of the Liturgy in the missions its scope was in one sense more restricted, but in another sense it was much enlarged. There is, on the one hand, more scope and freedom for the development of the liturgy in the missions where the field is less trammelled by the past than in Europe, and on the other hand, the problems of the liturgy in the missions have an even greater urgency. This was brought out by Bishop Blomjous of Tanganyika in his opening address, when he showed how the Church has reached a moment of crisis in the missions. When we speak of the 'missions', we are speaking of the new world of Asia and Africa which is coming into being at the present time and which is undergoing a radical transformation year by year. The problem of the liturgy in the missions is nothing less than the problem of the Church in the face of this new world.

The Congress was admirably representative of this new world. It was presided over by Cardinal Gracias and included about thirty bishops and thirty priests from different parts of Asia and Africa, besides experts on the liturgy from all parts of Europe and America. The papers which were read, besides dealing with the more general problems of the liturgy and the sacraments, focused attention on the problems of the Church in Africa, India and the Far East; and in the discussions which followed the presence of so many bishops and priests from these countries gave point to questions which otherwise might have become academic. From beginning to end the problem was seen to be that of the presence of the Church in the new world of today in which the future of the Church is so deeply involved. It was not merely a question of liturgical forms and rubrics but of the actual presentation of the Gospel, of the witness of the Church as the living presence of Christ on earth.

What I think came out most clearly from the beginning was the practical unanimity about the urgent need for the use of the vernacular in the liturgy. It is perhaps necessary to have offered

Mass in a large church in a 'mission' country where the vast majority of people are illiterate, to stand with your back to the people at the altar reciting words in a strange tongue, which you know to be quite unintelligible to everyone in the church, to realize the full gravity of this matter. The Sunday Mass is normally the one occasion on which the people meet together in the service of God; it is the unique opportunity alike for their instruction in the faith and for the expression of their religion. The first essential thing is that the service should be one which they understand and in which they can participate. This was the principle which guided all the discussions: how can the Mass be made an effective means of preaching the Gospel? How can the people be enabled to take their full part in the worship of God and in communion with one another? This is, of course, the problem of the Church everywhere, but it is in the missions that it is realized in all its gravity and urgency.

The historical background of the problem was admirably presented by Father Seumois, O.M.I., of the Propaganda College in Rome. He showed how the tradition of the Church has consistently been from the beginning that the liturgy of the Church should be said in the language of the people. In the Eastern churches this principle has never been lost, and the Popes from St Gregory the Great to Pius XII have consistently upheld the principle that variety of liturgical usage does not in any way affect the unity of the faith of the Church. It was largely due to an accident of history that the liturgical language of the West got fixed in a dead language and it was only in the later Middle Ages that the principle that the liturgy should be adapted to the language and customs of the people was abandoned. It was as a result of this late medieval development that in the new world of the Renaissance, when the Gospel was carried to America and the Far East, a uniform Latin liturgy was spread over the world. This is the situation which we have inherited and the liturgical movement has now to attempt to recover the earlier tradition of the Church, by which the liturgy was always adapted to both the language and the customs of the people to whom the Gospel was preached.

Various suggestions were made by which the liturgy of the Mass could be made to serve this apostolic purpose. The first and most essential is that the actual preaching of the Gospel, the *kerygma*, that is the reading of the Epistle and Gospel, should be done by the priest facing the people, in their own language. It is appalling to reflect that this essential task, the preaching of the 'good news',

according to the present rubrics, is now done by the priest with his back to the people in an unknown tongue. Nor is it sufficient that the priest should afterwards repeat the Epistle and Gospel in the vernacular. The liturgy is a drama, an action, as simple people realize instinctively, and it is essential that the actual proclamation of the Gospel should be made to the people in the language which they understand. To repeat it afterwards from the pulpit or to have it read at the same time by a lay reader is only a compromise. It is the essential character of the Mass as a proclamation of the Word of God which needs to be restored.

With the preaching of the Gospel goes the people's response to it, their prayer and praise and thanksgiving. It was generally agreed that the Common of the Mass, the *Kyrie*, the *Gloria*, the Creed, the *Sanctus* and the *Agnus Dei*, all of which are the people's part in the Mass, their response to God, should be said and, where possible, sung in the vernacular. At the same time it was suggested that the German custom of singing liturgical hymns in the vernacular in place of the Introit, Gradual, Offertory and Communion antiphons should be generally adopted, at least as a temporary measure. Ultimately, of course, it is desirable that the whole of the Proper of the Mass should be sung by the people in their own tongue. But here it was suggested that the ultimate goal must be the restoration of the Psalms to their original place in Christian worship, so that instead of the present short antiphons at these places, there should be communal Psalm-singing. Incidentally, Father Gelineau was present to illustrate how the Psalms can once more be made a popular form of Christian worship.

Finally, to complete the popular character of the first part of the Mass two other suggestions were made. First that a litany like that which is used in the Roman liturgy on Good Friday, and which is still found in most oriental liturgies, should be introduced before the Offertory, so that the people can pray in their own tongue for all the various needs of the parish, the diocese, the Church and the world, and so make the intentions of the Mass their own. And secondly that an Offertory procession should be introduced. In mission countries, especially, where people are accustomed to express themselves in action, it is essential that they should have something to do which can express their participation in the sacrifice of the Mass; and an Offertory procession, in which they can place their host for communion in the ciborium, thus recalling the custom in the early Church of bringing the gifts for sacrifice to the altar, is perhaps the best way in which their personal offering can be signified.

Thus the way was pointed out by which the first part of the Mass could once again become a popular service, a proclamation of the Gospel to the people in their own tongue and a popular response on the part of the people by way both of speech and action, enabling them to participate as fully as possible in the liturgy of the Church. The question of the Canon of the Mass was not raised, nor was there more than a passing reference to the value and example of the Eastern rites for the restoration of a popular liturgy. But it is worth pointing out that there is no objection in principle to the Canon being recited aloud and in the vernacular. In most oriental rites this has always been the custom and the advantage of the people actually hearing the sacred words said or sung aloud is tremendous. The reason that the custom grew up of saying the words of the Canon silently, like the corresponding custom of hiding the sacred rite by means of an ikonostasis in the East, seems simply to have been the desire to create an impression of mystery and 'holiness'. The same argument is used for the retention of the Latin language. These means may have had their value in their time, but one may think that the solemn beauty of the words, whether of the Latin Canon or the Greek anaphora, is quite sufficient to create an atmosphere of holiness in virtue of their profound theological significance. It is ultimately the theological meaning of the Mass which must make people realize its essential holiness.

It is not only the Latin language which is an obstacle to the understanding of the Mass and the people's participation in it. As Mgr van Melckebeke, who was for many years a missionary in China, remarked, 'if in the West Latin is the main element of incomprehension, in the Far East not only is the language foreign, but also the symbols, colours, vestments, music, gesture and behaviour'. This brings us up against an even more serious obstacle to the use of the Latin rite in the East. Few of us realize how very western the Latin rite is in its gestures and music and in the very form of its prayers, as well as in the more outward forms of colours and vestments. The Latin rite has its own very definite form of beauty, its sobriety, concision and restraint, but in the East many people prefer a more expansive form of liturgy with more poetry and symbolism. It is here again that the Eastern rites can teach us so much. The Greek rite of St John Chrysostom is incredibly rich in poetry and symbolism, and so also in their own way are the Syrian and Egyptian rites.

The Syrian and Egyptian rites are of particular importance when we are considering the shape of the liturgy in Asia and

Africa, because the Syrian is an authentically Asian rite, while the Egyptian, and still more the Ethiopian which derives from it, are characteristically African. The Syrian rite takes us back to the beginnings of Christianity as an Eastern religion in Asia. Though no doubt influenced by the Greek, yet it retains a strong Semitic character and belongs wholly to the world of the Middle East. In the Middle East it is now generally celebrated in Arabic and its gestures, the raising of the hands in prayer, for instance, and the prostration on both knees with the head touching the ground, are those which are common in the Middle East to both Christians and Moslems. It has also shown a wonderful power of adaptation to the Far East. It spread at a very early date to India and is still used by a very large body of Christians, both Catholic and Orthodox, in South India. It also spread during the seventh and eighth centuries right across Asia to China and seems to have become adapted in an extraordinary way to the Chinese mentality.

The Ethiopian rite, according to a paper by Father Boniface Luyckx, O.PREM., is uniquely adapted to Africa, especially in the matter of externals like the shape of vestments, the use of drums and dances (features which are found in Malabar in South India, but which seem to be of peculiar importance for Africa), and in regard to church music and church building. These externals are of incalculable importance in the missions. Simple people are moved very much by external forms and there is nothing which so stamps a Catholic church as foreign as its church architecture, its statues and pictures (all imported from Europe and generally in the worst taste), and its western music and vestments. Very little was said on this subject during the Congress, but there was an interesting paper by a South Indian priest, Father Amaladasan, on the use of indigenous music. There is a tradition of sacred music in India of great antiquity and of profound beauty and significance which is waiting to be utilized in our Church music. Some attempts in this direction have already been made, and if the vernacular were once permitted in the Mass, one may hope that this would be widely developed.

There seems to be more hope of a native sculpture and architecture developing in Africa than elsewhere at present, but this remains one of the most difficult problems. Perhaps the use of simple 'functional' modern churches, with as much restraint in decoration and as few statues as possible, is the safest course at present. There have been some interesting experiments in painting in Indian style, as also in Chinese and Japanese, but it is noticed that these appeal more to Europeans than to the people themselves.

One of the greatest obstacles here is, in fact, the astonishing attraction of the people to the worst forms of western religious art. There is often found also an attraction to sentimental devotions rather than to liturgical forms of prayer. But this is, no doubt, a matter of education. The symbolism of colours is an important element in the external impression of the liturgy. It is well known that in China white and not black is the colour of mourning. This suggests that a quite different scheme of colours for vestments might be desirable. In the Eastern churches the colour of the vestment is usually left to the choice of the priest.

In all these matters, the recitation of the Canon aloud, the use of the vernacular, the forms of prayer and ritual, the use of music and vestments, one would like to see the Latin rite adapting itself according to the principles of the Eastern rites, which are simply the principles which governed the ancient Church. The Church should be able to show herself in Asia and Africa not as a western institution governed by the laws and customs of the West, but as a Church of many rites and many languages, adapting herself to the needs of every culture and not imposing alien forms whether of language or ritual or architecture. It is worth while recording the words addressed by the Congregation of Propaganda to the vicars apostolic of Asia in 1659, which exactly express the mind of the Church on this subject: 'Do not wish and do not suggest to these peoples that they change their rites and customs. What is indeed more absurd than to bring France, Spain, or Italy, or any foreign country to China? Not that must be imported but the true faith which does not refuse or hurt any rite or custom so long as it is not bad.' What indeed! And yet that is precisely what was done, not only in China but throughout the East, and what has now to be repaired.

The liturgy of the Mass was not the only subject discussed at the Congress. Much attention was also given to the ritual, and especially to the rites of baptism. The question of the vernacular here raised no problem, as permission has generally been given for this, though it is far from being universally used. What engaged attention was rather the means of reforming the baptismal rite, so that it could become a more living expression of the mystery which it expresses. It was suggested that the present baptismal rite should be broken up, so as to extend over the period of the catechumenate. In this way each stage in the catechumenate would be marked by a solemn rite and the importance attached to the baptismal ceremony would be greatly increased. At the same time these ceremonies should be held in public on a Sunday

or holiday before the principal Mass, so as to give them the greatest solemnity and to inculcate the sense of community. All this would be but returning to the ancient practice of the Church.

But what is of the greatest importance is that the rite should be understood not as a mere form of words with a quasi-magical significance, but as a regeneration to a new life. Father Buhlmann, O.F.M., speaking of the liturgical renewal in Africa, declared very finely: 'We believe that religion in Africa was not so much a teaching as a doing, not creed but deed. In the initiation rites the candidate did not learn abstract teachings by heart but experienced the community of the ancestors, heard their voices, was buried and rose again. He received a new name and was dressed in new clothing—he was made a new man. Christianity does all this in a much deeper and more profound way, but it must not be done in its post-reformation form, but in its biblical and ancient form, in the form which is sought by the liturgical renewal: not so much as a teaching but as an event; not so much as a religion of law, but as the proclamation of the salvation of God through which a new life is given.'

It would be difficult to express more accurately what must be the ultimate purpose of the renewal of the liturgy in the missions. It must seek to create a Christian community in which the mystery of Christ, which is the Gospel of salvation, is experienced as a living reality. Baptism, Confirmation (the importance of which was stressed in the Conference) and the Eucharist must be seen as stages in the initiation of the people into this divine mystery, which has the power to transform their lives. The use of the vernacular, of native music and colours and customs must be seen simply as the external means by which the Christian mystery must find its way into the heart of the people. It was pointed out that there are two things which particularly mark the cultures of Africa and the East: the sense of a spiritual meaning in the material world and the sense of a social meaning in human activity—in others words, the sense of sacrament and the sense of community. These are the bases on which the Church in Asia and Africa must be built.

In this way Christianity will penetrate into the depths of the Asian and African soul. It must find in it the response to its profound sense of a spiritual reality behind the visible world, which has dominated the religion alike of the African tribe and of the Hindu and Buddhist peoples, and to its equally profound sense of a community resting on this spiritual basis which lies behind both the African tribal organization and the Hindu system

of caste (which is still of such immense power in India). There is no doubt that Islam in Africa makes a strong appeal to this double sense and is winning many converts as a result. On the other hand, western materialism, whether in its democratic or its Communist form, exercises a continual attraction, drawing the people away from their basis in religion. The future depends on the power of the Church to answer to this profound need and it is in the liturgy as the living centre of life that the answer must be found.

The Congress did not leave this issue in the air. Many concrete proposals were made, which it is hoped may lead to a renewal of the liturgy in the missions on the lines which have been indicated, and plans were made to establish centres of liturgical renewal in mission countries, which would be kept in touch with the principal centres in Europe. But perhaps most fundamental of all is the question of the training of the missionary priest, which was the subject of a special paper by the rector of a seminary in Africa. It is obvious that as long as our priests are trained in seminaries where the liturgy occupies so small a place in the whole life, as it does at present, there is little hope of any serious revival of the liturgy in the missions. It is necessary not merely that there should be courses in the liturgy in which a correct understanding of its significance is given, but that the life of the seminary should actually be organized on the basis of the liturgy. A seminary should be a place where a student goes not merely to study the doctrine of the Church but to take part in the worship of the Church and to be formed in the mystery of Christ. This means that the study of the Bible, not only as a source of doctrine but also as the basis of the spiritual life, should hold a first place, together with training and actual participation in the liturgy. Furthermore, as Father Hirst, C.S.S.R. insisted, the whole teaching of the seminary should be directed towards a deeper understanding of the mystery of Christ and the Church, not merely as an academic discipline but as a living power which has to transform the life of the priest, if he is to make it a transforming power in the life of the people.

These considerations apply, of course, to the training of priests in the West no less than in the East. In fact it was not the least value of the Congress at Nijmegen that by focusing attention on the problems of the liturgy in the missions, where the need is so starkly felt and where it can be seen so clearly that the whole future of the Church is at stake, it was able indirectly at the same time to bring more clearly into view what are the really no less urgent needs of the Church in the West.